

The locals and the Feast

As the participants of the 3rd International Summer Seminar for the Students of Ethnology organised July 30 – August 6 1997 we investigated the relation between the inhabitants of Alsóváros and the church feast devoted to Our Lady of the Snow.

In the course of the interviews made among local people we realised that during our century there have been great changes in the investigated field. After World War Two with the emergence of the new ideology the communist authorities unable to prohibit the feast, tried to downplay its religious nature. Thus the two periods can be distinguished clearly: the one prior the war and the post-war period.

Before outlining the pre-war customs, Sándor Bálint's work and its influence should be mentioned. He investigated this topic most thoroughly, his monograph posthumously published was entitled 'Szeged-Alsóváros. Church and community'. The personal influence of Sándor Bálint was also perceptible: middle-aged people had knowledge about the feast of Alsóváros only from personal conversations with Sándor Bálint and his lectures given at the parish.

The generation born in the 1920s spoke about how they prepared and celebrated the feast in the 30s and 40s based on their self-experience. This paper does not intend to supervise the results of Sándor Bálint, but tries to describe how the feast reflects the changes of the community in Alsóváros.

THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

Preparations

Preparations were being made on both sacred and profane levels. Whitewashing, house-cleaning done weeks earlier, also tidying the yard and surroundings belonged to the latter. The preparations for the feast had to be scheduled precisely, in order that everything goes according to the plan and the members of the household could take part in the events of the feast. A few days before the feast pickles and cakes were made. They prepared spiritually by fasting before the church festival.

The two days of the festival

Before World War Two believers used to come to the feast on foot accompanied by carts. In the parish it was announced that those with a bigger household should give accommodation to the pilgrims, who used to stay on the yard or in the shed. The hosts were very proud of having pilgrims as guests when they walked together singing to the church. Lodging was free, but the pilgrims were expected to pray for the hosts and their family. Sometimes pilgrims and hosts became friends, some groups staying at the same families year after year. Those living close to the church besides giving accommodation also made available their wells for the pilgrim groups to use.

During the two days of the feast local inhabitants used to receive guests in their home. There were about 30 guests at one family, mainly their relatives from the surrounding villages and farms. The visitors arrived already on the first day of the feast in order to take part in the masses and the vigil. Also local families went to church, usually the grandmother stayed at home and worked in the kitchen, though they tried to arrange the tasks in a way so that everybody could attend the mass. Mainly women stayed up at the vigil until 2 o'clock in the morning, despite their hard work on the following day.

Besides its religious content the feast also gave occasion for entertainment provided by the stall-keepers along Szentháromság street and the occasional wine-shops. The balls with live music organised for and by young people were also a part of the feast. Girls were allowed to go dancing with an escort. This was a good opportunity to make acquaintances.

The mass and procession on Sunday morning was really important for the locals, everybody tried to take part. The order of the procession was organised beforehand, though our informants could not recall it exactly.

For Sunday lunch generally chicken-broth, mutton or beef stew with paprika was cooked. Among different home-made cakes strudel was the most popular. The guests used to stay until Sunday afternoon, the pilgrim groups also left at that time depending on the length of their journey. The final mass completing the feast was mainly attended by local people after their guests left.

Our informants talking about their personal experiences from before the war were born in the 20s, so they were still young in those years. They recalled the church feast with pleasure referring to it as an event which they had annually prepared conscientiously and had a significantly strong effect on their life. Almost all the children got new clothes before the feast, they mainly enjoyed the procession and the atmosphere of the market. The church feast provided the possibility to cultivate family relations. It was the feast of a smaller community, non the less, they could become acquainted with people from other regions. The world opened wider in those days. One of the informants for example remembered a religious song she learned from a pilgrim group of the Southern Great Plain which she still sings with pleasure:

*Protector of Hungarian nation
 Be faithful shelter of your people!
 As through so many years
 Be faithful to protect this land!
 Shelter, Our Mother, this country
 Our Saint King offered to you.
 Our Lady, You be with us,
 Do not let us perish forever!*

The way their parents and grandparents celebrated this feast was ingrained in their memory, and at the same time it strengthened their religious belief. That is why it was difficult for them to accept the changes after the war, which completely transformed the relation between community and individuals influencing each layer of society.

LOCALS AND CHURCH FEAST IN 1997

As a result of the social mobilisation of the last few decades Alsóváros can not be considered as a 'peasant-town'. Due to the prohibition of religious activities during communism many people today have little desire to practise their faith.

Because of this, the church feast itself and the way it is celebrated are expressed in many different ways. The population of Alsóváros can be divided into four groups considering the proportion of religious and profane elements in the way of celebration.

In the first group there are people who stress both the religious and profane side of the feast. They are the believers who preserved the old customs. Most of them are older being born in the 20s, but their children and grandchildren seem to be continuing the tradition of celebrating the feast in this way.

Those belonging to the second group do not invite guests any more, thus the feast stopped serving as a cementing force in these families. They are mainly elderly people living alone who can only attend the regular mass services on a now and then basis. This is because of their poor health condition. Thus they can not receive guests in their homes, their children either live somewhere far away and are unable to come home, or they do not think that family reunions are important in their lives.

Those in the third group do not have any religious motivation whatsoever, but find the feast an opportunity of relaxing with relatives and friends or meet old acquaintances in the fair.

Thus the family tradition is preserved year after year, however, the members do not consider it important to go to church to give thanks to God. They pay only a short visit to the church as an accepted habit.

This feast has meaning for this people as it has either been a part of their lives since childhood or adopted the customs of Alsóváros through marrying into a local family. However, they see its significance only in keeping the family together.

While the number of guests was almost 30 at those belonging to the first or third group, nowadays there are not more than 10-15 visitors. Elderly people do not have the strength any more, their children come home usually only on Sundays or they can not help their elderly parents because of their working commitments. On the other hand sometimes the children bring home-made cakes and also help in cooking.

Preparations for the feast started already at the beginning of the week – they buy the meat, the drinks and start baking the cakes. The feast was not celebrated on 5 August, but on the following Sunday instead.

Changes in the Hungarian cuisine brought about the emergence of new vegetarian foods (e.g. cauliflower balls, pumpkin in fritters). Although the traditional type of cake, the strudel once a compulsory part of festival lunches, is hardly ever made nowadays demanding too much time and special skill. New kind of cakes are prepared which reflect individual taste.

For those belonging to the fourth group neither the religious nor the profane side of the feast is important. They only visit the market once or twice during the weekend to be entertained at the side-show or buy souvenirs. Mainly the new inhabitants of Alsóváros belong to this group, though there are some older locals as well who rather 'escape' from the feast considering it as unnecessary expense.

Finally we discuss the relation between work and feast, also the attendance of masses. There are fewer and fewer people emphasising celebration instead of work. This is true mainly of the members of the first group, who would, for instance, postpone a professional training course, in order to participate at the feast. Also the gathering of the family members is important for them. Whereas some people of the third and fourth group usually work also on Sunday receiving guests for Saturday lunch instead of the traditional Sunday.

Among the masses there are also preferred ones: the 6 o'clock mass on Saturday evening was popular among locals as they could stop for a short break during the preparations. The 9 o'clock mass on Sunday together with the procession afterwards was conducted by the bishop of Szeged-Csanád diocese, and was also attended by a lot of people. Sometimes Sunday lunch was put off because of this mass considering the long preparation time. The so called 'Mass for the Alsóváros locals' on Sunday evening was also popular as local hosts could go to church after their guests had left. Only a few believers attended the midnight mass for the deceased, the 7 o'clock mass on Sunday morning or in the afternoon the mass of a newly ordained priest.

To sum up we can conclude that the dwellers of Szeged-Alsóváros celebrated the church feast in 1997 in a rather different way than before the World War Two. Whether the current way of celebrating the feast becomes dominant in the years to come, a future study will decide.